

True and False Repentance

Charles G. Finney

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Published by
Christian Reality Books

P.O. Box 742947

Dallas, TX 75374

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Printed in the United States of America.

Foreword

This sermon by Charles G. Finney was instrumental in helping form my commitment to Jesus Christ. When I first began reading Finney's sermons and "Lectures on Revival", I had already studied many other philosophies and religions. (I thought I was being "well rounded" when, I was simply adding to my confusion.)

Keith Green mentioned Finney in a tract, and once I researched who he was, I knew I had to read more about him. His logic was unbreakable.

When I read "True and False Repentance," I knew that I had found the underpinnings of a theology that did exactly what Finney aimed at...

He found the rocks I hid from God behind and he destroyed them, leaving me with no excuse and nothing to say except, "Yes, Lord, be it unto me according to Thy Word."

From that point on I applied Finney's Biblical Logic to every area of life, and it has led me to where I am today.

If it were not for this sermon specifically, I'm not sure if I would have remained a committed Christian.

I am very pleased to be able to reproduce this amazing sermon from America's Foremost Evangelist!

Curry Blake

TRUE AND FALSE REPENTANCE

by Charles G. Finney

"For Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. For behold this self-same thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourself to be clear in this matter."
2 Corinthians 7:10-11

True repentance involves a change of opinion respecting the nature of sin followed by a corresponding change of feeling toward sin. Feeling is the result of thought. When this change of opinion produces a corresponding change of feeling, if the opinion is right and the feeling corresponds, this is true repentance. Godly sorrow, which God requires, must spring from His views of sin.

To one who truly repents, sin looks very different than it does to him who has not

repented. Instead of looking desirable or fascinating, it looks odious and detestable. He is astonished that he ever could have desired such a thing. Impenitent sinners may look at sin and see that it will ruin them because God will punish them for it. But it still appears in itself desirable. They love it. If it could end in happiness, they would never think of abandoning their sin.

But one who truly repents looks at his own conduct as perfectly hateful. He looks back and exclaims, "How detestable and worthy of hell my sin was."

Sinners don't see why God threatens sin with such terrible punishment. They love it so much that they cannot see why God thinks it is worthy of everlasting judgment. When sinners are strongly convicted, they see sin in the same light as a Christian does. Then all they need is a corresponding change in feeling to be saved.

Many sinners reflect on their relationship to God and know that they deserve eternal death, but their heart doesn't agree with

God's opinions. This is the case with the demons and wicked spirits in hell. A change of opinion is indispensable to true repentance and always precedes it. There may be a change of opinion without repentance, but no genuine repentance occurs without a change of opinion.

The unsaved sinner thinks it utterly incredible that sin deserves everlasting death. He may be fully changed, however, to see that sin injures himself and everybody else and that there is no remedy but universal abstinence. Even the devil knows this is true.

The word rendered "repentance" implies a change of opinion in regard to the just outcome of sin. The careless sinner has almost no right ideas about the just punishment of sin. Even if he admits in theory that sin deserves eternal death, he does not believe it. If he believed it, it would be impossible for him to remain a careless sinner. He is deceived if he supposes that he honestly holds the opinion that sin deserves the wrath of God forever.

The truly awakened and convicted sinner sees clearly that sin deserves everlasting punishment from God. To him it is simply a matter of fact.

A CHANGE OF HEART

In true repentance there must be a corresponding change of feeling. This change of feeling respects sin in its nature, its functions, its tendencies, and its outcome. The individual who truly repents not only sees sin as detestable, vile, and worthy of abhorrence, but he hates it in his heart. A person may see sin to be hurtful and abominable and still love it, desire it, and cling to it. But when he truly repents, he wholeheartedly abhors and renounces it.

This is the source of those tears of sorrow which sometimes break out when Christians see sin in its true nature. When a believer views sin in relation to God, he feels like weeping. Fountains of sorrow gush forth, and he wants to get down on his face and pour out a flood of tears over his sin.

When a believer views sin in its tendencies, it awakens a burning desire to stop it and save people from their sins. His heart is set on fire, and he prays with all his might to pull sinners out of hell and save them from the awful consequences of sin. It is as if he saw all the people taking poison that would destroy them. He lifts up his voice and screams, "Beware!"

He has an intellectual conviction that sin deserves everlasting punishment and is amazed that God can forgive him. Instead of thinking it severe or unkind that sinners are sent to hell, he is full of adoring wonder that he is not sent to hell himself. And when he thinks of such a sinner being saved, he feels a sense of gratitude unlike any he has ever known. If your repentance is genuine, you have a conscious change of views and feelings in regard to sin. Can you say this?

Do you know that there has been a change in you and that old things are done away and all things have become new?

Where repentance is genuine, the prevailing tendency to repeat sin is gone. If you have truly repented, you do not now love sin. You do not now abstain from it through fear or to avoid punishment but because you hate it. Look at the sins you used to practice. How do they appear to you? Do they look pleasant, and would you really love to practice them again if you dared? If you do have the disposition to sin left, you are only convicted. Your opinions of sin may be changed, but if the love of that sin remains, you are still an impenitent sinner.

The Scripture says, "Godly sorrow worketh repentance." Godly sorrow produces a reformation of conduct. Otherwise, it is like saying that repentance produces repentance. But repentance must be a change of mind that produces a change of conduct and ends in salvation. Have you forsaken your sins? Or are you still practicing them? If so, you are still a sinner. You may have changed your mind, but if you have not changed your conduct, it is not godly repentance.

REPENTANCE UNTO SALVATION

Genuine repentance leads to confession and restitution. The thief has not repented while he keeps the money he stole. He may have conviction but no repentance. If he had truly repented, he would go and give back the money. If you have cheated anyone and do not restore what you have taken; or if you have injured anyone and do not undo the wrong, you have not truly repented.

True repentance is a permanent change of character and conduct.

The text says it is repentance "not to be repented of." True repentance is so deep and fundamental that the man never changes back again. People often quote it as if it read "repentance that does not need to be repented of." But it says, not to be repented of and is so thorough that there is no going back. The love of sin is totally abandoned. Any individual who has truly repented has changed his views and feelings and will not change back to the love of sin. The truly penitent sinner exercises feelings of which he

will never repent--"unto salvation." The very reason it ends in salvation is because it will not be repented of.

False repentance is the sorrow of the world: sorrow for sin arising from worldly considerations and motives connected with the present life. At most false repentance has respect for the individual's own happiness in a future world and has no regard for the true nature of sin.

False repentance is not founded on a change of opinion like true repentance. A person may see the evil consequences of sin from a worldly point of view, and it may fill him with anxiety. He may see that it will greatly affect his character or endanger his life. If his secrets were found out, he would be disgraced--this may fill him with fear and distress. People often have this kind of sorrow when some worldly consideration is at the bottom of it.

Selfishness is at the root of false repentance. It may be a strong feeling of regret in the mind of the individual. He sees the evil

consequences of his actions, and it makes him miserable or exposes him to the wrath of God. Sin may injure his family, his friends, or himself in time or eternity. All this is pure selfishness.

He may feel remorse of conscience--biting, consuming remorse--and no true repentance. It may extend to deep and dreadful fear of the wrath of God and the pains of hell but be purely selfish. All the while there may be no abhorrence of sin and no feelings of the heart convicted of the infinite evil of sin.

False repentance leaves the feelings unchanged and the disposition to sin in the heart unbroken and unsubdued. The feelings about the nature of sin are not changed, and the individual still feels a desire to sin. He abstains from it not from abhorrence of it but from the dread of its consequences.

The individual who has exercised true repentance is willing to admit that he has repented and that he was a sinner. He who falsely repents resorts to excuses and lying to cover his sins and is ashamed of his

repentance. He will cover up his sins by a thousand apologies and excuses, trying to smooth them over and diminish their enormity. If he speaks of his past conduct, he always does it in the softest and most favorable terms.

REPENTANCE UNTO DEATH

False repentance leads to death. It makes people commit one sin to cover up another. Instead of that open-hearted breaking forth of humility and frankness, you see a half-hearted confession that confesses nothing.

Are you ashamed to talk about your sins? If so, then your sorrow is only a worldly sorrow.

Often sinners avoid conversation about their sins yet call themselves anxious inquirers, expecting to become Christians. The same kind of sorrow is found in hell. No doubt all those wretched inhabitants of the pit wish to get away from the eye of God. No such sorrow is found among the saints in heaven.

Open, genuine sorrow is consistent with true happiness. The saints are happy, yet have a deep, undisguised remorse for sin. But this worldly sorrow is ashamed of itself and is mean and miserable--its end is death.

The change produced by worldly sorrow extends only to those things of which the individual has been strongly convicted. The heart is not changed. You will see him avoid only those obvious sins about which he has been counseled.

Observe a young convert. If he is deceived, you will find only a partial change in his conduct. He is reformed in certain things, but he continues to practice many wrong things. If you become intimately acquainted with him, you will find him strict and quick-sighted in regard to certain things but far from manifesting a Christian spirit in regard to all sin.

Ordinarily, the change produced by false repentance is temporary even in those things which are reformed. The individual is continually relapsing into old sins. The

disposition to sin is not gone--only checked and restrained by fear. As soon as he has a hope, is attending church, and gets bolstered up so that his fears are relieved, you will see him gradually returning to his old sins. This was the difficulty with the house of Israel that made them constantly return to idolatry and other sins. They had only worldly sorrow. You see it everywhere in the Church. Individuals are reformed for a time and are taken into a congregation, but then they relapse into their old sins. They call it "getting cold" or backsliding, but the truth is, they always loved sin.

This is the foundation of all those flashes and starts in religion that you see so much of. People are awakened and convicted, but soon they settle down in false security and away they go. Perhaps they may keep their guard and won't be turned out of church; but if the foundations of sin are not broken up, they will return to their old ways.

A true convert's most obsessive sins before conversion are the furthest from them now. He is least likely to fall into his old besetting

sin because he abhors it most. But if he is deceived and worldly minded, he always tends toward the same sins. The fountain of sin is not broken up. He has not purged iniquity from his heart but has regarded sin in his heart the whole time.

BONDAGE AND LEGALISM

The change produced by false repentance is not only partial and temporary, it is also forced and constrained. The reformation of one who has true repentance is from the heart. In him the Bible promise is fulfilled. He actually finds that wisdom's "ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17). He experiences that the Savior's yoke is easy and His burden is light. He has felt that God's commandments are not grievous but joyous. "More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb." (Psalm 19:10)

But this spurious kind of repentance is very different: it is a legal repentance, resulting from fear and not love. Selfish repentance is

anything but a free, voluntary change from sin to obedience. If you have this kind of repentance, you will find that you are conscious that you abstain from sin not because you hate it but from other considerations. You are more motivated by forbiddings of conscience or the fear that you will lose your soul, your hope, or your character than from abhorrence of sin or love of God.

Such people always apologize for sin, evade duty, and think there is no great harm in doing as they do. They love their sins. If there is not some scriptural command of God that they dare not resist, they will continue in sin.

This is not so with true repentance. If a thing seems contrary to the great law of love, the person who has true repentance will hate it and avoid it whether he has a direct command from God for it or not. He sees it is contrary to the law of benevolence, and he would no more do it than he would blaspheme God, steal, or commit any other abomination.

The man that has true repentance does not need a "thus saith the Lord" to keep him from oppressing his fellowmen.

False repentance leads to self-righteousness. An individual may know that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners and may profess to believe in and rely on Him alone for salvation. But he is actually placing ten times more reliance on his reformation than on Jesus Christ for his salvation. And if he would watch his own heart, he would know it. He may say he expects salvation by Christ, but he is really building a righteousness of his own.

He supposes his worldly sorrow to be true repentance, and he trusts in it. He takes it for granted that Jesus will save him because he has had sorrow on account of his sins, although he is not conscious that he has never felt any resting in Christ. He felt sorrow, then got relief and felt better. Now he expects to be saved by Christ, when his very consciousness will teach him that he has never relied on Him.

The individual who has this kind of sorrow becomes harder in heart in proportion to the number of times that he exercises such sorrow. If he has strong emotions of conviction but his heart is not broken, the fountains of feeling dry up and his heart is more difficult to reach.

A real Christian who has truly repented is different. Every time you bring the truth to him he becomes more easily affected, excited, and broken under God's blessed Word. His heart gets into the habit of going along with the convictions of this understanding, and he becomes as teachable as a little child.

A HARDENING OF HEART

Churches--or individual members--who have only worldly repentance pass through a revival, get waked up, and then grow cold again. Let this be repeated, and you will find them more and more difficult to be roused. Soon they become as hard as millstone, and nothing can ever rally them to a revival again.

On the other hand, some churches and individuals experience true repentance. Let them go through successive revivals, and you will find them growing more and more tender. When they hear the trumpet blow for a revival, they will glow instantly and be ready for the work.

The distinction between true and false repentance is as broad as between light and darkness. The principle is illustrated in sinners, who after passing through repeated revivals, will scoff and criticize. Although the heavens hang with clouds of mercy over their heads, they reject it. If they don't have true repentance, every fresh excitement hardens the heart and makes them more difficult to be reached by the truth.

Some people are thrown into distress whenever the truth is flashed upon their minds. They may not have as much conviction as the real Christian, but the real Christian is filled with peace at the very time his tears are flowing from conviction of sin. And each repeated season of conviction makes him more and more watchful, tender,

and careful, until his conscience becomes so sensitive that the very appearance of evil will offend it. But the other kind of sorrow, which does not lead to true renunciation of sin, leaves the heart harder than before and soon sears the conscience like a hot iron.

False repentance is sure to be repented of. You will soon find these people becoming ashamed of the deep feelings that they had. They do not want to speak of them, and if they do talk of them, it is always lightly and coldly. Perhaps they bustled about in time of revival and appeared as busy as anybody. Very likely they were among the extremes in everything that was done. But now the revival is over, and you find them opposed to new measures, changing back, and ashamed of their zeal. In fact, they repent of their repentance!

After they have joined a church, they will be ashamed of their public repentance. When the height of the revival has gone by, they will begin to talk about being "too enthusiastic" and the necessity of being more sober and consistent.

You sometimes find people who profess to be converted in a revival turning against the very measure, means, and doctrines by which they profess to have been converted. Not so with the true Christian. He is never ashamed of his repentance. The last thing he would ever think of being ashamed of is the excitement he felt in a revival.

Many people have mistaken conviction for conversion and the sorrow of the world for that godly sorrow that "worketh repentance to salvation, not to be repented of." I am convinced, after years of observation, that this is the reason for the present deplorable state of the Church all over the world.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

Many sinners think it is a great trial to give up their ungodly companions and their sins. If they had true repentance, they would not think it any cross to give up their sins. When I first saw young people becoming Christians and joining the Church, I thought it was a good thing because their souls would be saved and they would get to heaven. But at

the time repentance seemed to be a very sorrowful thing. I never dreamed then that these young people could ever be truly happy.

It is very common for people who know that Christianity is good to think they cannot be happy in the Church. They do not understand that true repentance leads to an abhorrence of those things that were formerly loved. Sinners do not see that when their young friends become true Christians sinful amusements are crucified.

People who experience false repentance do not know what it is to enjoy Christianity. They are not cheerful and happy. They are grieved because they have to withdraw from so many things they love or because they have to give so much money. They are in the fire all the time. Instead of rejoicing in every opportunity of self-denial and rejoicing in truth, the plain truth distresses them. Why? Because their hearts do not love to work for God. If they loved to do their duty, every ray of light that broke in upon their minds from

heaven would be welcomed and would make them happier.

Perhaps you think I suppose all true Christians are perfect. There is a radical difference between a backslidden Christian and a hypocrite who has returned to the world. The hypocrite loves the world and enjoys sin when he returns to it. He may have fear, remorse, and apprehension about the loss of character; but, after all, he enjoys sin. The backslidden Christian is different. He loses his first love, then he falls prey to temptation and enters into sin. But he does not love it. It is always bitter to him, and he feels unhappy and homesick. He has, at the time, no Spirit of God to keep him from sin, but he does not love it. He is unhappy, and he feels like a wretch. He is as different from the hypocrite as can be. He can never again enjoy sin or delight in the pleasures of the world. Never again can he drink iniquity like water. As long as he continues to wander, he is miserable.

Convicted sinners are afraid to pledge themselves to give up their sins. They tell

you they can't promise to do it because they are afraid they won't keep the promise. They love sin. The drunkard knows that he loves strong drink. Although he may be constrained to abstain from it, he still craves it. Likewise, the convicted sinner loves sin, and his hold on sin has never been broken-- he dares not promise to give it up.

Sinners who have worldly sorrow can now see where the difficulty lies and why they are not converted. Their intellectual views of sin may be such that if their hearts corresponded, they would be Christians. Perhaps they think this is true repentance. If they were truly willing to give up all sin, they would not hesitate to pledge themselves to it and have all the world know that they had done it.

If you are willing to give up sin, you are willing to promise to do it and willing to have it known that you have done it. But if you resist conviction and still love your sins, all your convictions will not help you. They will only sink you deeper in hell for resisting them.

Let us pray that this is the evidence that our repentance is genuine: "For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a Godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves, yea, what indignation, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter" (2 Corinthians 7:11).



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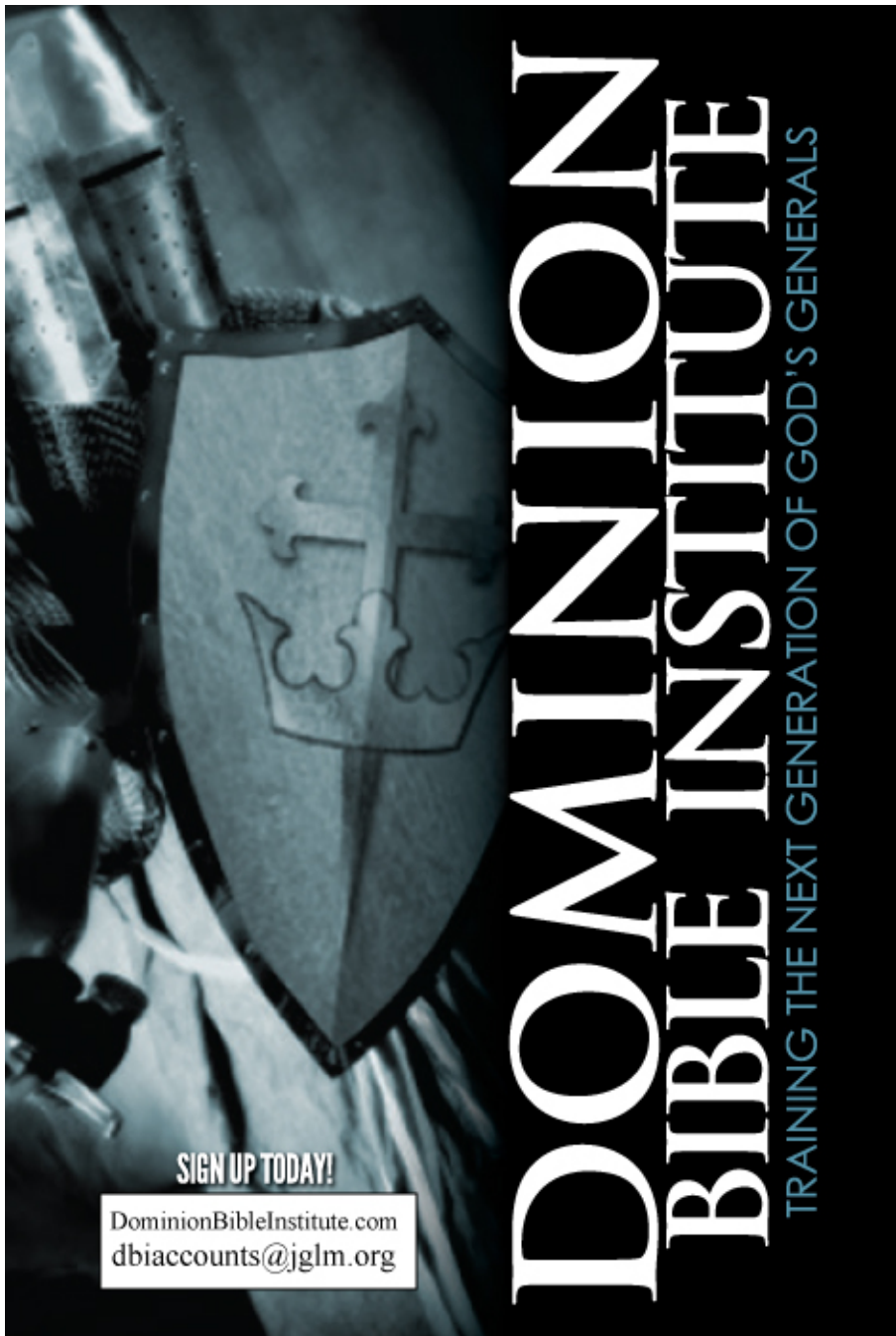
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